DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 981 CS 213 124

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TITLE Writing Abilities of First Graders: Whole Language and Skills-Based Classrooms.
PUB DATE Nov 91
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Lexington, KY, November 13-15, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; *Conventional Instruction; Grade 1; *Instructional Effectiveness; Primary Education; *Whole Language Approach; *Writing Ability; Writing Research; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS African Americans; Alabama

ABSTRACT

A study compared the writing abilities of children in a whole language classroom with those of children involved in a skills-based classroom. Subjects, 37 African-American students in two heterogeneous first-grade classrooms in a low socio-economic area school in the inner-city of a large Alabama city, completed a reading/writing assessment (a sample of the Stanford Achievement Writing Test for second-grade students) after 7 months of instruction. One group of subjects consisted of 19 students who had been instructed using a whole language curriculum; the other group consisted of 18 participants who had been instructed using a traditional curriculum emphasizing skill mastery. Writing samples were analyzed according to content and the ability to express thought. Total words and t-units (number of thoughts) were also compared between the groups. Results indicated that, on all tools of assessment, the whole language group scored significantly higher than the skill-oriented group. (Five tables of data are included; 18 references are attached.) (RS)

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Writing Abilities of First Graders: Whole Language and Skills-Based Classrooms

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association, Lexington November, 1991

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing concern about the excessive amount of testing which goes on in the elementary school. In addition to the number of tests being given, many educators question the educational values fostered by standardized tests. Fiske (1968) suggested that simple answers, low-level skills, and quick thinking as measured by tests, are the criteria by which we judge our schools. This is in contrast to advancements in research, theory and practices which do not view these criteria as goals for our schools. Kamii (1990) wrote that qualitative research techniques are most appropriate when assessing the development of student's literacy. Unfortunately, standardized achievement tests continue to be used in many parts of our nation.

Many states and local school systems grapple with teaching and assessing writing. Numerous procedures for assessing writing are being used or piloted as writing becomes more of an instructional focus for classroom teachers. Research is needed to determine the effectiveness of instructional practices.

The purpose of this study was to compare the writing abilities of children in a whole language

classroom with those of children involved in a skills-based classroom.

Statement of the Problem

Will first grade students who have participated in a whole language, thematic curriculum score significantly higher on a writing assessment sample than first graders who participated in a skills-based class in which direct, traditional instruction was the primary teaching strategy?

Significance of the Problem

Up to the present time, reading and writing abilities of children in Alabama and many other states have been evaluated according to the way they bubble in answers to isolated items related to language. In contrast, whole language involves a holistic belief in the way language should be taught and evaluated. Whole language teachers have made a transformation in the way they teach and evaluate in their classrooms. Where isolated skills were once taught for mastery, true reading and writing experiences are now used. A dilemma arises each spring when these same teachers have to give achievement tests which evaluate language competence in terms of isolated skills as measured by bubbling answers on a scanner sheet.

Recently, in the state of Alabama, the notion of administering a writing assessment in which writing is scored in a holistic manner was introduced. In the spring of 1991, a large number of schools across the state participated in a pilot testing of second and fifth grade students. If the results of such testing reveal a significant difference in the performance of students in whole language process writing classrooms than students from traditional skills instructed classrooms, administrators may consider a change in language curriculum instruction.

Literature Review

A visit to primary classrooms to see how young children are taught to write would reveal a variety of practices taking place. In some schools, writing is composition of text; while in another it might be imitation of the writing of adults. In some classrooms, children are busy writing. In such classes, there are a variety of forms of writing such as scribbling, drawing, letter strings, some conventionally written words or phrases and well-written stories. In other classes with a different view, children copy conventionally spelled words from the chalkboard, mark ditto sheets, and practice the

formation of letters in perfect conventional form.

From the scenario just described, Sulzby (1990) addresses the problems of differing views concerning young children's abilities in writing. She refers to writing as "written composition and not just the mechanics of letter formation and word copying" (p.84).

The teaching and assessment of reading and writing has been controversial for years (Chall,1967; 1989; Carbo, 1988). Along with this controversy is an uncertainty of how and what to assess in literacy. Milz (1983) expresses that a major point of concern has been whether the teacher is responsible for the child learning how to write, or if the learner is at the heart of the writing process. Temple, Nathan, and Burris (1982) stated that no one really understands exactly how we learn to write, but it seems that we learn to do it at least as much by discovering how as by being taught. Because of the uncertainty of how and what to assess, Strickland and Morrow (1989) discuss the need for determining appropriate goals for evaluating students.

In the midst of this controversy, an increasing number of teachers are turning to a whole language

perspective as they initiate classroom instruction. This choice opts for teachers and children to be in control of their learning rather than programs. Goodman, K., Smith, Meredith, and Goodman, Y. (1987) describe whole language as "curricula that keep language whole and in the context of its thoughtful use in real situations" (p.6). Edelsky, Altwerger and Flores (1991) emphasize that whole language is a theory in practice and thus reading and writing are learned through real reading and writing rather than simply doing exercises in reading and writing.

As whole language teachers place emphasis upon reading and writing in their classrooms, they also look for qualitative measures of assessing their students written endeavors (Manning, G., Manning, M., 1991). As teachers become increasingly aware of the constructive processes of children in learning to write, a new focus on what children bring with them to the classroom will be necessary for true assessment.

Bissex (1980) provides a case study of her own child's progression in writing and Milz (1983) examined selected first graders as they progressed in writing abilities throughout the school year. Calkins (1986) and Graves (1983) give rich advice concerning

how to facilitate writing in the instructional setting. Clay (1975) Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) and Temple, Nathan, and Burris (1982) have all contributed to our understanding of writing. Their concepts and principles, levels, and features of emergent writing respectively, are basically in agreement as to how writing abilities evolve from scribbling to conventionality. Although research has given descriptive indications of the progressions children from infancy through school entry move through as writing develops, there is a need for research to determine the effectiveness of instructional practices upon writing.

Methodology

The Sample

This study took place in a low socio-economic area school in the inner-city of a large Alabama city. The participants came from two heterogeneous first-grade classrooms comprised of African-American students. All students were from low socio-economic homes; they were on free or reduced lunch, according to the state free lunch program.

One group consisted of 19 students who had been participating in a whole language curriculum for seven

months in which the children had been actively involved in meaningful reading and writing activities focusing on theme units of study. The other group consisted of 18 participants who had been instucted in a traditional classroom for seven months in which skills mastery was emphasized. The administration randomly assigned each group to the classrooms at the beginning of the school year.

Instrumentation

The evaluation tool used in this study was a reading/writing assessment for first grade similar to the state draft given as a pilot test for second-grade students. The draft was a sample of the Stanford Achievement Writing Test which will be administered to all second grade students in Alabama in 1992.

Procedure

The assessment consisted of listening to a poem being read aloud and then discussing the main topic of the poem (wind). Next, a story on the same topic was read together from a Big Book. The story consisted only of a beginning; it was the student's task to finish the story. The participants were given 20 minutes to complete the writing task and five minutes were given at the end for rereading and revision if necessary.

Measurement Techniques

The writing samples were analyzed according to content and the ability to express thought. Total words and t-units were also compared between the groups.

Content could be divided into six distinct areas: 1) Those students who wrote an ending as the directions of the test implied; 2) Those who were working on an ending, but did not complete before the time limit; 3) Those who wrote a whole story along with an ending; 4) Those who wrote a whole story with new content other than that in the reading; 5) Those who simply rephrased the beginning of the prompt that was read; and 6) Those who tried to write, but were unsuccessful. Table 1 shows how the classes compared when the content of the writing sample is taken into account.

Insert Table 1 about here

The ability to express thought in writing was evaluated using the levels developed by the Avon Grove School District, West Grove, Pennsylvania (Nessel, Jones, & Dixon; 1989). The first five levels used in this study were:

Level 1 : Garble, absence of any reconstructable thought.

Level 2 : One to three thoughts, possibly mixed with garble, some reconstruction necessary.

Level 3 : At least three related thoughts requiring minimal reconstruction.

Level 4 : Level 3 criteria, plus: a sense of relatedness with movement of thought through the writing, or a summary idea.

Level 5 : Level 4 criteria, plus: at least one complex sentence, and development of one or more good ideas.

Table 2 compares the number and percentage of students from each class according to the Avon Grove levels.

Insert Table 2 about here

The writing samples in this study were also evaluated in terms of total words and thought units. Total words were tallied and a median score was assigned to each group for comparison purposes. Table 3 reveals the comparison of the two groups in terms of total word usage.

Insert Table 3 about here

T-units (number of thoughts) were tallied for each student and totaled for each group. These statistics were analyzed in terms of the mean T-unit score for each group. Table 4 contains T-unit tallies and the mean for each group.

Insert Table 4 about here

The percentage of students in each group who used above five T-units in the sample is presented in Table 5.

Insert Table 5 about here

Summary of Statistical Analysis

On all tools of measurement, the whole language (WL) group scored significantly higher than the skills-oriented (SO) group. When content of the writing samples was evaluated, 12 of 19 (63.1%) of the WL experimental group completed the assigned task of writing an ending to the story. The SO control group had one out of 18 (5.5%) of the group

who completed the task as directed, although, 27.8% of the control group wrote the whole story with an ending.

The WL experimental group had 11 of 19 (57.9%) scoring in the Level five range on ability to express thought while the SO control group had two of 18 (11.1%) attain this same level.

A comparison of total words reflects a higher score for the WL group with a group mean of 46.16 words in comparison to 32.78 words for the SO group. The group mean of T-units for the WL group is also higher with a mean of 5.84 in comparison to the SO group mean of 4.83.

The total number of samples above five T-units reveals that 10 of 19 (52.63%) of the WL group wrote above five T-units while six of 18 (33.33%) in the SO group wrote above five T-units.

Recommendations and Conclusion

A concern regarding this type of writing assessment as part of the state testing program is that it may cause teachers who do not understand the process of writing to start teaching writing for the test. Traditionally, teachers have taught writing by putting emphasis on the correctness rather than on content and

process. Teachers who do not understand the constructive aspects of language development will not value the process of writing.

An initial reccommendation to this dilemma is to help teachers understand the writing process. As the results of this study reveal, process writing students appear to be much more successful in writing abilities. When the abilities of students are viewed in terms of content rather than isolated, irrelevant skills, students are given the opportunity to freely show where they have control of their language.

Table 1

Content of Writing Samples

Type of Content	Experimental		Control	
	N	%	N	%
Wrote an ending	12	63.1	1	5.5
Working on an ending (did not complete)	3	15.7	0	0.0
Whole story with an ending	1	5.3	5	27.8
Whole story with new content	1	5.3	3	16.7
Rephrased the beginning of the prompt read	1	5.3	4	22.2
Tried, to write, but unsuccessful	1	5.3	5	27.8
Totals	19	100.0%	18	100.0%

Table 2

Writing Levels

Levels	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Experimental						
N	0	3	4	1	11	19
%	0.0	15.8	21.0	5.3	57.9	100.0
Control						
N	1	7	4	4	2	18
%	5.6	38.9	22.2	22.2	11.1	100.0

Table 3

Total Words

	Experimental	Control
Total Words	877	590
Group Mean	46.16	32.78

Table 4

Total T-units

	Experimental	Control
Total T-units	111	87
Group Mean	5.84	4.83

Table 5

N/Above Five T-units

	Experimental	Control
N/Above 5 T-units	10	6
% Above 5 T-units	52.63	33.33

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